

The Research Process

The second I read *Accident Report in the Tall, Tall Weeds* by Ada Limón out of her collection *Bright Dead Things*, I knew that I wanted to focus on the relationship between the poem and masculine love for my final research paper on English 310. Being a man, I am not unaccustomed to how society has, traditionally speaking, fit us into the box of being quiet or violent about the way we love. It is something I wished to be able to make a commentary on through my final research paper for the class, but it being my first larger project in college, I found myself a bit unsure of where to start. Luckily, my class met with Dr. Kearns who went over how to effectively use the library databases to aid our projects. Armed with knowledge following that, I set off to start my research.

Starting off I really was just plugging search terms into the databases and scrolling, “masculinity AND love,” “men AND poetry,” “masculinity AND love AND violence,” anything I could think of to start pulling articles towards me. Then there was the scrolling, I spent so much time scrolling for article titles to catch my eye, and looked through plenty that did, only to find after reading the abstracts that they weren’t what I was looking for. I remembered during the lecture on how to use the databases, two search terms, if I remember looking back it was something like “grief” and “death,” something I wouldn’t have expected to have brought up the article *Narratives of Those Who “Love” Violently: Identity Issues and Construction of Meaning of the BATTERERS*; now that I could use for my paper. This article also opened up a new opportunity for me, using articles that weren’t literary criticism to inform my argument.

The other two articles I found weren't outside the realm of literature, but this first article greatly informed the way I thought about the other two as well as my paper. I knew how society had trained men to push their emotions deep down until they exploded, or how society had

accepted that coming out in violent outbursts, but seeing interviews done with violent men who had harmed their partners, ranging in ages 16-57, makes you face the gravity of society's failings. Even at age 16 the belief is that violence was the proper way to express love as a man, if you are to express it at all.

When I found my next to articles under the search terms I had originally been searching I kept that first source in the back of my mind, thinking of the indoctrination into this stereotype men are facing, and how literature may reinforce or try to break this. Both articles I found helped me shape this further *Gender Representation in Poetry for Young Adults* showed how poetry written by adults for young audiences reinforced the gender stereotype for men, but when young men wrote it for themselves they found an outlet to be sensitive and thoughtful. I was able to use *Undoing violent masculinity: Lynne Ramsay's You Were Never Really Here* to talk about this societal issue through the guise of the "traumatizing mother" figure mentioned in the article.

The database articles I used allowed me to inform my paper on what scholars were currently saying, to better understand society's stance as a whole, and how I would like to deconstruct it. While I didn't find any criticism of the poem that I wanted to use, switching my strategy away from that helped this paper greatly and allowed me to expand on my own thoughts in ways I hadn't originally anticipated. I am grateful for the ways I believe this project helped me grow in my research skills, especially in a new research environment.

Harrison Jones

Dr. Matlock

English 310

4, December 2024

A Love Letter to Those Who Cannot Say “I Love You.” Ada Limón and the Deconstruction of
Gender Roles in Favor of Masculine Love

“I can’t help it,/ I love the way men love.” (Limón, 64) How do men love? Are they the stoic protector or are they brash and violent villains? The scholarly conversation around masculinity and love largely centers around the inherent toxicity of it, like it is a snake in the garden wrapping around a gently outstretched hand only to bite it. To some degree this is good, we should discuss this and unpack the gender roles that have woven this toxicity into the men around us. But like Ada Limón, “I can’t help it,/ I love the way men love.” (Limón, 64) Not the violence of it but the less spoken about, silent, unwavering kind. It is why this poem has spoken to so many people, and been spoken about in so many circles. An anonymous user on Tumblr wrote: “You know that Ada Limón poem where she’s like ‘[I]can’t help it [I] love the way men love[?]’ [M]y dad recently confessed to me that he became a shoemaker because they buried my grandma shoeless.” This is the kind of devotion that has a man learn about plane crashes just because his brother is a pilot. It is emotional in a world where men have been taught not to be, they cannot speak the warmth of their care, so they act on it. Ada Limón’s *Accident Report in the Tall, Tall Weeds* confronts us with this, showing despite the gender stereotype of men being emotionless there is nothing as undoing to that standard as love.

While work has been done to combat this there is still a strong narrative in many societies that aggression is a way of showing love. Many little girls have heard that the little boy on the

playground is just pulling on her pigtails because he likes her. The kind of violence that breeds distrust, that has women rightfully and “deliberately... walking away from... speeding vehicles...” (Limón, 65) just because a man, one they may know or not, is inside. But what does this societally accepted aggression look like once these boys become men? Rita Conde, Rui Abrunhosa Gonçqlves, and Celina Manita aimed to study the adult version of the male aggressors, wife beaters, from an unexpected perspective; that of the wife beaters. In their article *Narratives of Those Who “Love” Violently: Identity Issues and Construction of Meaning of the Batterers* they spoke to 12 men, three who had been in confirmed violent relationships, four in an ambiguous situation, and five who hadn’t; though all expressed violent tendencies.

Consistently among the men the violence was rationalized by claiming their partners “supposedly tampered with the values and expectations included in this repertoire—lack of understanding, reciprocity, and openness of the partner, as well as disagreement, misunderstanding, and communication problems...” (Conde, Abrunhosa Gonçqlves, Manita) Interviewee 11 discussed the anger he felt as a constant “because [he] love[ed his girlfriend] so much and [he] wanted her to be just [his]. So [they] had a discussion [and he] began to insult [her]. [He] just grabbed her, [shook] her, and pushed her. But [it] was more a discussion, there was no violence.” (Conde, Abrunhosa Gonçqlves, Manita) But would most not describe that as violence?

It is important to note that interviewee 11 is 16 years old, and the youngest of the group, but many of his sentiments were shared by the group which ranged from his age of 16 all the way through age 57. Interviewee two who is 31 years old shared a similar sentiment saying that “love was too much, feelings are so intense that you can’t control them, and you became physically aggressive. [He] lost control and [he] beat her.”

How do we get to this point, where aggression or contemplative silence is the only way men know how to express their emotions? It has taken generations of societal conditioning to get to the point we are at right now; “family, peers, quite probably genetics, as well as cultural norms, influence gender identity.” (Beumer Johnson, McClanahan, Pank Mertz) All of these, in turn, however, influence the media one consumes, especially in today’s day and age with media constantly at one’s fingertips. Angela Beumer Johnson, Lauren G. McClanahan along with Maia Pank Mertz took a deeper look into how poetry specifically influences young people’s gender identity in their article *Gender Representation in Poetry for Young Adults*. They read “approximately twenty volumes of poetry from university and public library systems.” (Beumer Johnson, McClanahan, Pank Mertz)

One such volume was *Class Dismissed! High School Poems* by: Mel Glenn, which often reinforced traditional gender stereotypes including sentiments like “a man has to stand up for himself...”(Glenn) While the collection was published in 1982 the point of view of masculinity being tough, and strong is still often held today, especially by older generations, which are then saying and attempting to instill it into the younger. What is interesting however is this contrasted with the volume of poetry *Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans*, where young people were actually given the opportunity to write about themselves. In sharp contrast with Glenn’s macho and insensitive male depiction, many of the young men in this volume use the “identity” section to define themselves not as these stereotypes, but rather as poets. The first male narrator in the section “identity” begins each stanza of his poem by defining what kind of poet he is, “[he is] a sun poet... [he is] a rain poet... [he is] a sea poet... [he is] a building poet... [he is] a space poet...” (Beumer Johnson, McClanahan, Pank Mertz) Despite many famous poets across history being men, poetry itself, with its sensitivities and wonders, is not something

associated with the traditionally masculine. But when you take young men, who have possibly not had these societal pressures engrained into them yet they choose to align themselves with the emotional and sensitive.

So when you have two young men like interviewee 11 and the narrator of the first poem in the “identity” section, both are emotional but the expression is what separates them. Violent or quiet, contemplative love, what makes a man? Sue Thornham’s 2018 article *Undoing violent masculinity: Lynne Ramsay’s You were never really here* brings the idea of “the traumatizing mother,” she cites Joanna Wilson-Scott’s argument that “mothers function as ‘the principal traumatizing factor’ in the creation of their violent sons. In them, his humanity and status as a victim is asserted through her demonization and depersonalization...” (Thornham, 7) within many literary works as well as other forms of media. The mother must be repressed to make the violence of the son seem sympathetic, so she is absent or abusive.

The traumatizing mother is a trope, she is fictional, but she is real in the way we raise our sons. She is real in the way we baby boys until they’re violent young men who have their “whole lives ahead of them,” so surely we can’t convict them. She is real in the way we bandage their scraped knees, but still reprimanded them because “boys don’t cry.” She is present in every violent act they commit where we scream “boys will be boys” until their hands aren’t pulling pigtails, but rather loading a gun. She is in every yanked-away dandelion or doll because those are “for girls.” She is in every husband who has laid a hand on his wife in front of his children teaching them that it’s okay, that it is just the way things are. She is in every bottled-up jar of emotions stored in the ribcage of a man waiting till the pressure is too much and glass shards explode out and carve their way through the man and anyone in his way. The traumatizing mother is not real, she is not a mother, or maybe in some cases she is, but the truth is we the

society are the traumatizing mothers who have woven these stereotypes into our boys and men; in every echo of forgiveness for violence and in every reprimand for emotion.

“Mostly, [we] enjoy [our] failings. Until [we] don’t.” (Limón, 63) We have failed our boys by allowing their entitlement and violence, and discouraging making room for emotions that are not blinded by rage or stoicism. We have not taught them to be truthful and forthcoming with their emotions, so if they find themselves getting hit by a bus they will not text their ex “something horrible and scary just happened to me, life is short, I got confronted with that, I miss you.” Instead, it will be “...*Now will you talk to me? I got hit by a bus.*” (Limón, 62) If they worry for their pilot brother they will not express that the heart in their chest lurches every time a plane goes down. Instead, “[they memorize] the wrecked metal details,/ the clear cool skies cut by black scars of smoke... how people go on, and how people don’t.” (Limón, 63)

A thread on Tumblr started a conversation with over 100,000 responses just by a user quoting “I can’t help it,/ I love the way men love.” (Limón, 64) I, of course, shared this with you earlier, a man who became a shoemaker because his mother was buried shoeless. This one quote and story generated over 100,000 responses because we got the gender stereotype wrong, men are not logical, and women are not solely emotional, we as humans are all emotional, and that is what Ada Limón is telling us, all of these responses by men violent or stoic are emotional, they are the responses that generation after generation has taught them, and that generation after generation has taught everyone around them to be okay with.

“I joined the wrestling team and my dad began to learn everything about the sport and showed up to as many tournaments as possible. He even let me paint his nails for every pin I got!” (Cindric White)

“[A]fter my beloved pet rat died in my arms when [I] was 12 my dad wrote me a poem called 'the passing of a friend' to help me grieve.” (Tumblr User defilerwyrn)

“[W]hen I was in middle school my dad started driving me to class every day. I always [thought] it was because he likes to get up early and my mom was busy taking my brother to his school (different one). [W]ell, now that I’ve graduated highschool he confessed to me that he knew I was struggling mentally. [S]o he wanted to spend more time with me, he doesn’t like getting up early and his work wouldn’t start for a while after dropping me off, but he’d get up and drive me to school anyway. [W]e’d listen to music together and joke and have deep talks, it was my favorite part of the day and he did it all the way up to my high school graduation ceremony.” (Tumblr user i-am-not-to-be-perceived)

“[M]y dad kept moving around the country and the world on military duty just so we [wouldn't] have to. Everything he did was to prepare me and my brother for life. [T]hat really was his focus. [H]e really suffered so we [wouldn't] have to. I [didn't] need to pay for college and when he committed suicide, me and my brother [didn't] have to pay for college and grad school because of life insurance, [I don't] have a [mortgage] because of his military benefits. [H]e even left me a binder of everything [I] needed to do in case he died. [H]e had it for years. [A] part of me wishes he loved differently in a way that I could recognize when he was alive, but [I] know that he at least tried. [H]e did what he could.” (Tumblr User weremound)

None of these stories are about men saying “I love you,” but aren’t they? It’s never verbally spoken, but anyone reading these would call that love or devotion, and no one would call these men unemotional. That’s it, isn’t it, love is a word, but it’s not just that, love is an action, love is the undoing and rebuilding of all things.

“[A] part of me wishes he loved differently in a way that I could recognize when he was alive...” (Tumblr User weremound) We can confront these parts of us that leave the people in our lives feeling this way, “part female, part male, part terrible dragon.” (Limón 64) We can cut off the head of this terrible dragon and heal the other two. Condemn the violence, and praise the emotions, boys do cry, and sometimes boys aren’t just being boys; start small and move forward. According to historians it took 1,229 years to build Rome, and it may take that long to undo and rebuild the society we have built, and there will be bumps along the road, during those times “*stay safe and seek shelter.*” (Limón, 65) But it will still be built that way, won’t it? If we can undo the current gender stereotype with love, then we can build a new one with it too.

Works Cited

- Conde, Rita, Gonçalves, Rui Abrunhos, & Manita, C. "Narratives of Those Who "Love" Violently: Identity Issues and Construction of Meaning of the Batterers." *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol.62(5), 2022, pp. 748–769.
- Johnson, Angela Beumer. McClanahan, Lauren G. Mertz, Maia Pank. "Gender Representation in Poetry for Young Adults." *The ALAN Review*, vol. 26(3), 1999, pp. 39-44.
- Limón, Ada. "Accident Report in the Tall, Tall Weeds." *Bright Dead Things: Poems*, Milkweed Editions, 2015, pp. 62-65.
- Thornham, Sue. "Undoing violent masculinity: Lynne Ramsay's *You Were Never Really Here*." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol.22(1), 2022, pp. 148-165.

Annotated Bibliography

Scholars have already been discussing the idea of gender roles in poetry for a very long time. Angela Beumer Johnson and Lauren G. McClanahan's article *Gender Representation in Poetry for Young Adults* discusses the gender roles already set up within poetry, and how we are instilling them in the youth around us. That is largely where the current discussion around poetry and gender roles lies, with how it has already been ingrained into us. Furthermore, specifically, masculinity has been discussed mostly within the scholarly field for its violence and toxicity within literature. I wish to take my project in the direction of unpacking the brutality we have instilled in masculinity and seeking out how men love using Ada Limón's *Accident Report in the Tall, Tall Grass* as a lens.

Conde, Rita, Gonçalves, Rui Abrunhos, & Manita, C. "Narratives of Those Who "Love"

Violently: Identity Issues and Construction of Meaning of the Batterers." *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. vol.62(5). 2022. pp. 748–769.

Narratives of Those Who "Love" Violently: Identity Issues and Construction of Meaning of the Batterers presents a study done on the violence twisted into love by men who committed spousal battery, this includes interviews with them, showing how some felt "[justified] for the beginning of conflicts and the adoption of violent behaviors." It also included five distinct repositories and analyzed the meaning of each mindset.

Johnson, Angela Beumer. McClanahan, Lauren G. Mertz, Maia Pank. "Gender Representation in Poetry for Young Adults." *The ALAN Review*, vol. 26(3). 1999. pp. 39-44.

Angela Beumer Johnson, Lauren McClanahan, and Maia Pank Mertz's 1999 article

"Gender Representation in Poetry for Young Adults" takes the approach of educators in

the discussion around “[how] literary works...can shape the way adolescents view their gendered selves and others.” (39) It features poetry written for adolescence audiences and how those poems reinforce gendered stereotypes, and how different the stereotypes between genders are. Furthermore stating that we should think critically about the work we present to young minds.

Thornham, Sue. “Undoing violent masculinity: Lynne Ramsay’s *You Were Never Really Here*.”

Feminist Media Studies. vol.22(1). 2022. pp. 148-165.

Largely revolving around the movies *You Were Never Really Here* and *Taxi Driver* Sue Thornham works to discuss violent masculinity and the fault of the parents through the lens of these films. She discusses the figure of the “traumatizing mother” which “...secures the centrality of a troubled, angry, but potentially heroic masculinity, but which leaves its violent anger finally unexplained.” Her article draws on psychoanalytic theory that men made to be heroes in media cannot exist without the “traumatizing mother” figure. This further begs questions to real life about how parents might be responsible for their own children’s behavior.